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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRESIDENT GUL IN DAMASCUS 1/19

REF: A. A.) WILSON-VOLKER E-MAIL 1/18/08

[1](#)B. B.) 07 ANKARA 2942

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Turkish officials told us President Gul plans a one-day visit to Damascus January 19 in connection with a cultural event the SARG is organizing, but will urge Asad to play a positive role in Lebanon. Visiting NEA PDAS Satterfield urged that Gul push Asad hard to allow presidential elections in Lebanon to move forward now and without preconditions. The Turks promised us a readout of Gul's talks. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) PDAS Satterfield used the opportunity of January 18 meetings on Iraq with Turkish officials to raise USG concerns about SARG behavior after learning of plans for President Gul to travel to Damascus on January 19. According to Presidency foreign affairs advisor Turkoglu, Gul was worn out by recent visits to the U.S. and Egypt, but reluctantly accepted Asad's invitation to participate in a Damascus as cultural capital of the Arab world event in order to consult on Lebanon. Gul, accompanied by a small delegation, will arrive mid-day, meet privately with President Asad, participate in the cultural event, and then join a dinner hosted for him and the Emir of Qatar by Asad. MFA Deputy U/S for the Middle East Sinirlioglu advised that Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa will probably join the festivities as well.

[1](#)3. (C) Satterfield emphasized to FM Babacan, Turkoglu, and Sinirlioglu that the USG takes a dim view of SARG behavior. He discussed the Syrians' cynical game of patiently waiting for the international community to tire of dealing with instability in Lebanon so that they can reassert dominance. Referring to the lack of success achieved both by France and the Arab League in recent diplomatic initiatives, he said further such interventions will only lead to more demands for concessions from March 14. Satterfield cautioned the Turks regarding pro-Syria Qatar and expressed concern about how this particular visit may be used by Asad. He urged that Gul press Asad on behalf of Turkey and the international community to see that what the SARG is doing in Lebanon is not in the best interests of Lebanon or long-term stability in the region. Gul should push for Syria to allow presidential elections in Lebanon to take place now and without further conditions. He urged against any Damascus result that might embrace Amr Musa's latest proposal for a meeting between Aoun and Hariri or any other new compromises.

[1](#)4. (C) FM Babacan and Deputy U/S Sinirlioglu described PM Erdogan's and Babacan's own efforts in Beirut and Damascus to engage on Lebanon, as well as Presidency/Prime Ministry foreign affairs advisor Davutoglu's work in December (ref B). Babacan said that Ankara has told the Syrians they will be blamed by the international community if anything goes wrong in Lebanon and that Turkey does not want another center of

instability in the Middle East. The Turks agree that the Syrians mistakenly thought they could use the French initiative to obstruct progress in Lebanon. They will stress to Asad that he must think twice about such an approach, act in a positive way and be part of the solution, not the problem. Sinirlioglu noted Gul would consult before departing for Damascus with the Saudi King.

15. (C) COMMENT: The Turks understand USG concern about Syrian behavior and share it. However, they continue to believe that Asad is a reformer and, through engagement, think they can help Asad push back against hardliners within his regime by allowing him to point to the need to stay in Turkey's good graces. The GOT's priority in dealing with its immediate, troubled neighborhood is to maintain stability, and it seems to recognize that SARG actions threaten this end-goal. How sharp Gul's message will be remains to be seen.

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